

Engineer Buttons and Castle

By Captain Herbert D. Vogel, Corps of Engineers

Editor's Note: The seal of our Society...includes in its design the turreted castle which, since 1840, has been the dominating feature of the insignia of the Corps of Engineers.

Lieutenant Blodgett, newly commissioned in the Corps of Engineers, had been thoroughly enjoying himself until the young lady asked that question about his buttons. He had had a fine dinner, the orchestra was playing smoothly, and he knew that his new uniform fit him perfectly. Then came the question!

"Why," she inquired, "do you wear buttons different from those that Daddy wears?"

Now when a girl is the daughter of a General Officer and that General Officer happens to be your Division Commander, you can not very well slide out from under such a question by a flippant remark to the effect that maybe it's her Old Man who's wrong. No, this was undoubtedly a question calling for a sensible answer, and he was stumped.

Looking back upon it all he was sure that his answer had left much to be desired, and to make it worse, he had even muffed the next question as to the significance of his castle insignia. Three days later, when seeking out the truth, he blushed the color of his company guidon to recall that he had stuttered something about "that building out by the reservoir in Washington—or perhaps the library at West Point." At the time, though, he had seemed to remember that someone had once told him that one or the other

of these buildings had served to furnish the original design for the insignia of his branch. It was all very vague.

As a matter of fact, the Lieutenant should not be too severely criticized for failure to know the answer to the question so unexpectedly propounded. The whole story of the insignia is obtainable only from fragmentary records and incomplete descriptive articles. The assembling of pertinent data is an almost impossible task to anyone not in the immediate vicinity of Fort Belvoir and Washington.

For Lieutenants who do not have the answer, therefore, and any others who may be interested, the following information is presented.

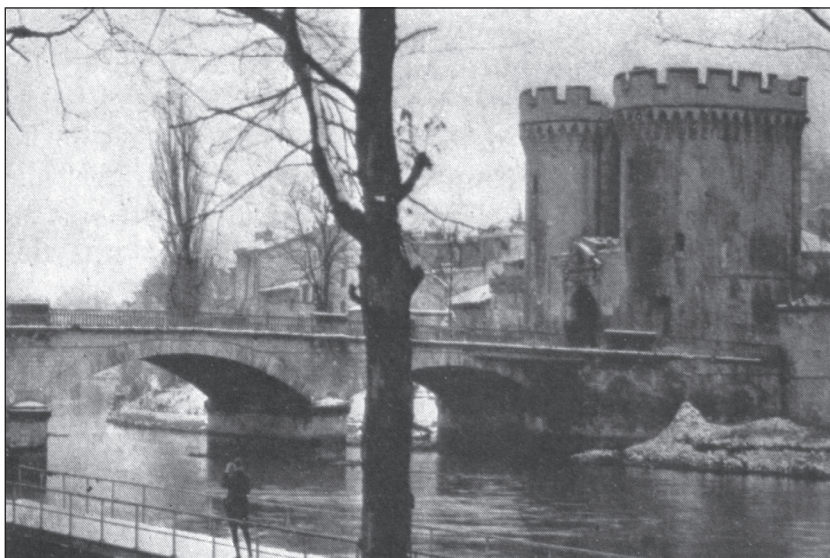
Historical Data

According to General Harts,¹ the gateway to the city of Verdun was taken by the Marquis des Androuins as the basis of a design which he made about 1780 for a Corps of Engineers in the young American Army. Androuin, an erstwhile resident of Verdun, and an officer of the French Army had volunteered for service in the United States during our War of the Revolution and had been given the task of organizing the Corps of Engineers.

Following the Revolutionary War, the history of the Corps of Engineers became entwined with that of the Military Academy at West Point, and the castle design was apparently forgotten until about 1807. In that year, Colonel Jonathan Williams began the construction on Governor's

Island of the first casemated battery in this country as one of the defenses of New York. Whether his design was influenced by the early insignia of his Corps or not, the final structure, completed in 1810, was so like a castle in its appearance that it became known as "Castle Williams." An outstanding feature of its design was a large eagle over the center.² Since Colonel Williams had served as the first Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, beginning April 13, 1802, it is probable that he was attempting to perpetuate the castle insignia in his design of the battery.

In any event, Castle Williams produced such a profound effect and brought so much credit to the Corps that when distinctive buttons were designed a few years later (probably about 1812), they were made to embody a casemated, embrasured,



Gateway to the City of Verdun

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Castle Williams

crenelated battery of masonry defending a waterway, with a National eagle over the center. The French word *Essayons* was apparently inserted to suggest the influence exerted upon Colonel Williams during his residence in France as an American Agent at the time of the Revolutionary War.

There is at present in the Ordnance Museum at West Point, a button from the uniform of Capt. Alden Partridge, worn in 1816. This button is, in general, identical with the present Engineer button, the only difference being that the individual elements, mainly the bastion, are of slightly different aspect. A uniform worn by Sylvanus Thayer about 1830 has similar buttons.

From 1821 to 1851, officers of Engineers wore a star and wreath as a distinctive collar device, but in 1839 a turreted castle had been adopted by General Totten as the basis of a design for a belt plate. This castle was substantially the same as we now know it and apparently similar, if not identical to the one designed by Androuin. The following is quoted from a letter from the Office of the Chief of Engineers in 1903:

Sept. 12, 1839: John Smith, military tailor, 168 Pearl St., N.Y.C., sent to Gen. Totten (Sup't. U.S.M.A.) a belt plate showing the "Castle" made according to the design furnished him by Capt. F.A. Smith. Gen. Totten replied, Sept. 17, "The work is satisfactory except the castle. I think it best now to have the castle executed in this city, possibly under my own immediate supervision to serve as a pattern." Oct. 25, 1839, the belt was returned to Mr. Smith "approved" in a letter signed "by order, F.A. Smith, Capt. and Asst. to the Chief Engineer."

In 1840, an order was issued to define items of the uniform in considerable detail. The following description is taken from this order:

Buttons—gilt, nine-tenths of an inch exterior diameter, slightly convex; a raised bright rim, one-thirtieth of an inch wide; device an eagle holding in his beak a scroll with the word "Essayons," a bastion with embrasures in the distance, surrounded by water, and a rising sun; the figures to be of dead gold upon a bright field. To be made after the design in the Engineer Office. Small buttons of the same form and device, and fifty-five hundredths of an inch exterior diameter.

The same order stipulated that engineers would wear silver castles on their epaulettes, forage caps, and belt plate. All orders and regulations prior to 1840 and later than 1813 prescribed only that engineers would wear the "button now established," no description being given of said button. In 1813, the General Order stated that engineers would wear a button of "distinctive design with motto." This substantiates the view that the small group of Engineer officers existing at that time chose their own button and that it was continued by tradition until 1840, when it was described and established in orders.

In 1851, regulations were published relative to uniforms and insignia of the Army and included in these was the following description: "Cap ornament for officers of the Corps of Engineers: A gold embroidered wreath of laurel and palm, encircling a silver turreted castle." Enlisted men wore the same castle but of gold metal.³ The choice of silver for the officer's insignia seems to follow directly from the traditional colors of the Engineers, which were red and white. In G.O. No. 93, A.G.O., Nov. 26, 1866, the Battalion Color was designated to be of "Scarlet * * * * bearing in the center a castle with the letters 'U.S.' above and the word 'Engineers' below, in silver; fringe white, Cords and tassels to be red and white silk intermixed."⁴ It is thus seen that silver castles were traditional with officers of the Corps of Engineers from at least 1851 until the promulgation of AR 600-35 in 1921, when silver metal was exchanged for brass in conformity to the rest of the Army.

A Board of Officers convened by Par. 14, S.O. 52, March 3, 1902, A.G.O. decided, relative to buttons for the uniform, that they should be: "For all officers—Circular, slightly convex, device, coat of arms of the United States. * * * * Engineers to retain their present design but conforming in all other respects to that for the Army." This order was



**Officers'
Button**

**Soldiers' Collar
Ornament**

**Officers'
Castle**

subsequently amended as follows: "For all officers except Engineers * * * For officers of Engineers * * * circular, slightly convex; device, an eagle holding in his beak a scroll with the word 'Essayons,' a bastion with embrasures in the distance surrounded by water, with a rising sun. * * * Insignia * * * Corps of Engineers, a silver turreted castle."

Recapitulation

Piecing together the information contained in the preceding paragraphs, the following sequence of events is deduced:

1780—The Marquis des Androuins designed a castle insignia for a corps of engineers (Corps du Genie) in the Continental Army, this design being based on the gateway of the City of Verdun. A similar castle had been used as early as 1159 on the shield of the Count of Lenzberg.

1802—Jonathan Williams, an Engineer officer, became first Superintendent of West Point.

1807—Jonathan Williams began construction of the first casemated battery in this country at what is now Governor's Island.

1810—Castle Williams was completed to the great credit of Colonel Williams and his Corps.

Circa 1812—Small group of officers comprising the Corps of Engineers, began wearing a distinctive button with castle, water, rising sun, eagle and motto, all of which relate to Colonel Williams and his castle.

1813—Engineers were directed by regulations to wear a distinctive button with motto.

1839—General Totten directed design of present castle.

1840—Silver castles were ordered worn on epaulettes, forage cap, and belt plate. Distinctive buttons were described in detail for the first time.

1851—Buttons were again described, and silver castles (surrounded by laurel and palm leaves) were prescribed as cap ornaments.

1902—Buttons were again described and prescribed.

1921—Silver castles were changed to gold.

Endnotes

¹Brig. Gen. William W. Harts, "Origin of the Engineer Insignia," *The Military Engineer*, September–October, 1930.

²S.A. McCarthy, "The Insignia of the Corps of Engineers," *The Military Engineer*, September–October, 1921.

³*Uniform and Dress of the Army of the United States*, June, 1851, Wm. A. Horstmann and Sons, Philadelphia.

⁴"History of Engineer Troops in the U.S. Army, 1775–1901," *Occasional Paper No. 37*, Engineer School, Washington Barracks, 1910.



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